

CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND ATTITUDES TO SETTLEMENT'S PATTERNS

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The main objective of this paper is to relate design to man's social and cultural needs. The research is based on a comparative case study analysis of existing house-settlement systems in two residential areas - a modern government built scheme, and a traditional development, in Algeria. The main assumption was that traditional houses and settlements were culturally more responsive than their modern equivalents. However, results refuted this assumption and indicated that social change affected many of people's values and attitudes towards their settlements patterns. The research combined evidence from documentary sources and field surveys. A multiple-method strategy was adopted to compare the two settlement systems. This included direct observation, interviews and trade-off games. The interview survey included three groups of people: the users, the local planning authorities and the building contractors. By stressing the socio-cultural variables, this paper does not deny the role of other variables. On the contrary, the author accepts that design activities should aim towards maintaining a balance between environmental factors and financial constraints.

Keywords: House/settlement system, Architectural and urban form, Socio-cultural change.

Introduction

It is now quite evident that the idea of “universal language of form” in design, particularly in housing, has failed (Congress of New Urbanism, 1993). For example, the famous Fruges¹ neighborhood in Pessac in France reflected many of the central points of Le Corbusier's theory (Boudon, 1993). Some years later, a post-occupancy evaluation revealed a gap between the architect's belief in International Style and what local culture regarded as an acceptable residential environment. Boudon (1993) showed that people had altered their housing to conform, in both interior and exterior appearance, with the basic features of the regional type.

This non respect of the local traditions has been under intense criticism by a growing number of scholars and professionals who assert the importance of a cultural interpretation of architectural and urban form (CNU, 1993).

On relating Design to Man's Social and Cultural Needs, a Brief Literature Review

¹ For more information see <http://incrementalhouse.blogspot.com/2008/07/pessac-france-quartiers-modernes-fruges.html>

Rapoport (1969) has been a leading exponent of the view that social and cultural factors have a primary influence upon the design of houses. In his book 'house, form and culture', he challenged those studies that emphasized climate, construction materials, and/or economic factors as determinants of house form, and demonstrated the primacy of cultural systems in helping to determine the design and form of houses and later of urban forms (Rapoport, 1977).

Rapoport's pioneering work has since been followed by many other studies that related cultural and social factors to the design and use of houses. For example, Banham (1984) illustrated the association between possible forms of human shelters and the 'predisposing cultural habits of a people'. King (1980) and Hawkes (2002) edited a number of contributions on buildings and society and successfully demonstrated the relationship between social forms and built forms.

Lawrence (1987) presented a comparative study of certain cultural, social and architectural factors related to the design and use of houses, and concluded that: "houses are the material expression of a matrix of cultural and social variables".

The focus on the cultural variables does not, however, deny the importance of physical, economical and/or political variables. Indeed, this study acknowledges the contribution of such factors; what it argues with is the 'causal interpretation' of the design and shape of the built environment which consider only these factors.

For example, it has been quite common for researchers to relate the design and development of house forms and settlement patterns to one or several factors of a physical kind, such as the availability of materials, or the topographical and climatic context. However, while these factors can facilitate and make possible or impossible certain decisions, they cannot decide or impose form.

The large variety of forms itself shows that, it is not just climate, site or materials that decide the shape of our habitat. Social and cultural forces, including religious beliefs, social organization and interaction play an important role in the choice among varied existing possibilities, and affect greatly the shaping of man's built environment. Of course, the more severe climatic, economical, material and/or technological constraints become, the less are the non-material aspects open to freedom of choice. In no case, however, are they completely without influence.

Lawrence (1987) admits that the significance of social and cultural factors as discussed by Rapoport was irrefutable. But he argues that a historical perspective is necessary for understanding how both physical and social factors change and how these kinds of transformation are embodied in the design and use of the built environment.

This research paper accepts cues from both Rapoport's and Lawrence's theories and seeks to relate design to man's social and cultural needs. It illustrates how cultural and social variables are operative in the use of the residential environment, and shows that it is essential to account for these variables when formulating design and planning policies for the development of new residential environments. The main postulate is that the object of design activities is to provide urban and architectural forms that facilitate and maintain a functional balance between human needs, environmental factors and financial constraints. The stress on the social and cultural variables is an attempt to redress the balance which has been lost because of their neglect. Hence, by opting for an anthropological approach, that is an approach mainly based on an examination of the human aspects that help in determining physical forms, particularly those related to behavioral patterns and culture, this research attempts to supplement and complement the various other urban design and housing researches.

Therefore, although the main theme of the paper is a discussion of the social and cultural issues related to the design and use of the built environment, and particularly the house/settlement system, the research does not ignore that there are climatic, political, economic, technological and other issues of great complexity and delicacy in addition to the cultural dimension. Indeed, the 'successful and good' solution is the one that rationally uses the available resources to fully express the preferences, aspirations and other needs of the group for whom it is meant.

What this research argues is that what is considered as 'good' or what is perceived as desirable or undesirable environmental quality is culturally variable. Thus an overgeneralization of human needs is quite wrong. Thinking that people's needs and attitudes are static is equally wrong. Societies are characterized by both change and continuity, and replicating design of some traditional 'Golden Age' is equally prone to failure.

The Research Methods

Designers and planners are accustomed to dealing with needs quantified in terms of number of families to be housed, work stations, or school places to be provided. It is now admitted that research cannot, and should not be restricted to quantifiable variables. It should encompass cultural and social variables often seen through human activities and behavior.

In this particular study the 'multiple-method' strategy was adopted (Zeisel, 1984). This included 'scouting' visits, direct detailed observation and recording, interviews, and trade-off games. Records of planning, design and building processes were also searched. Subjects were selected by a systematic sampling method, which yielded slightly less than a ten percent sample of dwellings in the study areas. Three groups of people - the residents, planning officers and architects, and building contractors - provided information.

The case studies were chosen because of the juxtaposition of 'traditional' and 'modern' residential environments. The valley of M'Zab² which in the past was characterized by its remoteness and inaccessibility is now on the major road through the Sahara Desert. The discovery of oil and gas in the neighboring fields of Hassi-Messaoud and Hassi-Rmel led to considerable change and growth in the area's economic activities. This attracted many workers from all parts of the country, and caused the development of vast government housing schemes, resulting in an unprecedented juxtaposition of old and new.

In effect, the old indigenous settlements are introverted and characterized by a multi-level division of space into private, semi-private, semi-public and public.

The streets and other places in these settlements follow a certain hierarchy and the circulation pattern itself functions as a social and control mechanism. The courtyard house is the dwelling type, and houses are clustered radially and along dead ends.

On the contrary, the new settlements are grid patterned and divided into two clear spatial domains, the very public and the very private. The dwellings borrow many norms and standards from different European countries especially France³.

² The valley of M'Zab is situated in the Northern part of the Algerian Sahara at a distance of 600 km by road from the capital Algiers

³ The new housing scheme was made by a French architect. Although the country is celebrating its 50th independence anniversary, French influence is still very strong in all parts of Algeria. And many dwellings are directly connected to French televisions by satellites.

The survey protocol conjugated different measurement techniques as well as diverse sources of information and helped to:

Establish How Residents Used, Appropriated, Felt About, and Evaluated their Dwelling-Settlement System, and How the Different Systems Met the Needs of their Users

By observing the residents' interaction with their environments by:

- Studying behavior at the neighborhoods and dwellings selected.
- Recording physical traces particularly furniture layouts in the selected dwelling's living rooms and courtyards.
- Identifying physical clues such as adaptive changes to the dwellings and surrounding landscape.

By interviewing the residents about:

- The physical characteristics of their residential environment.
- Their household's characteristics such as households' structure, socio-economic status, origin and past residential patterns.
- Their activity patterns and the way they used the different places and facilities. -
- Their degree of satisfaction with their residential environment, their likes and dislikes.
- Changes they have made in their dwellings and surroundings, about unfulfilled desires to make changes, about adaptations and the intended effects when making them, about expectations for future adaptations.

Identify What Peoples' Preferences and Aspirations were by:

- Developing a trade-off-game - Through which respondents express their trade-off preferences by making a series of choices -
- Interviewing private building contractors - by discussing market's demands, and the most popular type of dwelling -
- Analyzing archival records - by studying the latest architectural plans and drawings submitted for planning permission –
- Visiting all private housing development still under construction in the area -

Identify How Design Decisions were Made by

- Analyzing diverse documentary sources such as the Master Plan of the area, the building regulations, and official reports.
- Going through all the 'construction permits' or planning applications submitted during the first six months of 1986, and identifying the reasons for refusals.
- Interviewing designers and other local housing authority officials by discussing the planning and building regulations as well as the criteria for granting a planning permit.

Analyze the Relationship Between Designers and Users by

- Identifying the different opinions and attitudes towards the planning and construction regulations.
- Looking at the reasons for the non-respect of the planning regulations.

More information about the users' aspirations was collected by an analysis of the architectural plans and visits to selected samples of private housing development still under construction.

The Research Findings

The findings of the research are varied and some of them unpredictable. The function of cultural systems in helping to determine house forms and settlement patterns is now recognized in theories of architecture and settlement design and the research confirmed this statement. However, the statement which postulates that a traditional settlement is culturally more responsive than a modern one, is partially refuted as neither settlement is found totally responsive to today's users' needs and desires.

The lack of change in the adobe traditional settlement which is patterned after an earlier lifestyle, and the radical, unrelated changes in the modern settlement which is mostly patterned after alien social and climatic environments, are both rejected. The study reveals that cross-cultural influences have affected many aspects of the Algerian family's lifestyle and its attitude to the house/settlement system.

Cross-Cultural Influences on Changes in Behavioral Patterns and Attitudes

The effects of cross-cultural influences on changes in behavioral patterns, attitudes, lifestyles and other artifacts are now well documented. In fact cross-cultural influences are as old as recorded history, however the degree of acculturation varies from one case to the other.

In Algeria, for example, the cultural impact of the Ottoman Empire was less than that of France. This was mainly due to the 'assimilationist' French educational policy. This imposed change by a power technologically superior led many people reared in one tradition to adopt new norms and sometimes change their values.

After independence, the acculturation process was continued by means of cooperation contracts. Large number of French technical workers and teachers came to assist with the development of the country, and in the same manner thousands of unskilled workers migrated to France. Technological development in mass communication and transport broadened even more the contacts, and the international exposure.

Change, however, is not always generated by external forces. The introduction of wage employment not only brought economic changes but also affected the relationships between different members of family, society and societies themselves. It provided a new status not only to the male but also to the female wage earners. This affected the family structure, size as well as male/female, relationship which in turn influenced people's attitudes towards housing and the built environment in general.

Tradition and Aspirations: The Perpetual Conflict

A general impression that emerges from the research is that there is a conflict between tradition and aspirations. As tradition tends to be modified by aspirations, so these latter are restrained by

tradition. This conflict is reflected in the residential environment where the juxtaposition of old and new attests to the great discontinuity between the past and the present. It is against this loss of continuity that some of Algeria's intellectual elite engaged in the search for a 'cultural identity'.

This research suggests that there is no 'identity kit' and that any search for an authentic regionalism should look beyond easy imitations of local traditions. Designers and policy makers should resist the temptation to impress the stamp of their own personalities and beliefs, and regard the demands of the users as of paramount importance, and base any design directly on the needs and requirements of the users. Participation, where people are involved in the decision making process, and flexibility that allows for more change and personalization, would for example not only create a place with unique authentic expression but a place with which the user themselves could identify.

The Built Environment as a Setting for Evolving Human Activities

Apart from suggesting the need for a more comprehensive approach, this paper also rejects the doctrine of determinism related to the design of built environments. It is now accepted that physical variables are not determinants of behavior but act as enabling factors.

The built environment is considered as a setting for human activities. It can inhibit or facilitate certain behaviors, but cannot however, determine or generate activities. In fact it could be even seen as an information system, providing possibilities for choice, with some choices being more probable than others.

The main objective behind studying behavior is that since needs underlie manifest actions, studying behavior will help to give inferences about needs (Michelson, 1980). In the same manner analyzing the relationship between groupings systems, in terms of space and behavior, would help increase understanding of how specific social groups interact with the built environment. This would eventually help to identify why a particular group of people conduct certain activities in particular ways, and the spatial segregation of those activities.

Indeed, daily activities of people, and their associated customs and conventions are usually taken for granted. However, a large number of studies have illustrated how right and precise information about the real usage of places was necessary if livable built environments were to be designed ; how sensitive and accurate processes for understanding places and how they are experienced by ordinary people during normal days are essential in the training of any professional involved in the design process.

Bridging the Gap Between Social Research and Design

Many designers complain that most behavioral and/or social scientists do not deliver the result of their studies in a form which can be directly used in the design process. Developing a 'common and precise vocabulary' would not only bridge the communicability gap, but also increase interaction and 'feed-backs'.

Indeed, it is quite wrong to assume that there is an inherent difference between research and design. Research ought to be considered as a 'process' rather than just the methodological application of various assessment techniques.

This process begins in the earliest stages of designing a structure and continues once that structure has been occupied and used, assessing and evaluating it in order to provide information to improve future designs and design processes.

Furthermore, detailed comparative studies and analysis of existing built environments can help the designer not only to understand the pertinence of some fundamental principles related to the design of environments but also to identify tendencies for change, and therefore help the designer to plan and design for change. Indeed, the dynamic and active characters of cultural and social variables imply that the needs and preferences of a group may change not only from generation to generation but through the course of the individual's life cycle.

Conclusion

Varied cultural landscapes, life-styles, languages are usually highly appreciated. As they not only make the world richer, more complex and interesting, but they also offer wider choice. Furthermore, by analogy to ecology, it could be in fact argued that a diversity of groups and species leads to stability a preservation of cultural diversity seems then quite desirable.

Through studying human-environmental behavior and using multiple-methods strategies, it is possible to bridge the gap between design and social research. A reorientation of the educational system would help towards a better communication not only between different professional practices and disciplines, but also involving the lay people. Finally, this study suggests that designing for potential adaptability a characteristic of traditional design, reflects culture, and would not only accommodate change, but would also involve active participation by people and therefore raise the level of responsibility and satisfaction.

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